

My name is Greg Siekaniec, and this is my life wildlife. I am the Regional Director for the US Fish and Wildlife Service in the Alaska Region. I grew up in Minnesota, the western prairie region, and was fortunate enough to have exposure to what I call the lakes country of Minnesota. My parents had a lake cottage lake cabin, that we spent a great deal of time at. And it was happened to be adjacent to a National Wildlife Refuge. So I got an exposure to what's Tamarack National Wildlife Refuge. And as I grew up, probably 12,13,14 and parents that were very open to like, hey, just go out, go outside and go do things. I had access to a really fun 10 foot john boat and a little 10 horsepower motor and free rein to run around. And I actually figured out how I could go from one lake to the next and end up in Tamarack refuge, which I found to be the most fascinating place around and had this inkling that someday I would really love to work with whatever that represented at the time, had no idea really what a National Wildlife Refuge was about, but was fortunate enough to be able to figure that out. And, you know, with the access then to that boat and a little motor. I was everywhere up there on that that country.

[school bell rings]

Well, it was, as you can imagine, it was a little bit complicated, because you know, in high school, and you have high school counselors and such, and that was able to express interest in what I wanted to do was, you know, I wanted to be in forestry, or I wanted to be in something that represented that kind of outdoors work, and there was a fair amount of, you know, well, there aren't really any jobs in that, you know, that's, you know, a very rare exception. And so I got distracted by that. And I actually went into construction management, and went into a completely different degree field. Managed to start a small construction company worked as a building inspector for the state of Minnesota, but had in the back of my mind that I was not doing what I really wanted to be doing, and then spent a little bit more time exploring, well, what does it really mean to be, you know, in wildlife work or in wildlife biology and up one day and left that other field and went back to the University of Minnesota and finished up with a degree in wildlife biology between Minnesota and University of Montana and, and then along the way, found the Fish and Wildlife Service, had summer intern type programs, had summer employment programs and started working with the Fish and Wildlife Service around North Dakota, which I was hired in a kind of a crazy sort of way. They hired me for my Construction Skills and the ability to help them do summer projects and, you know, remodel facilities and buildings and build, you know, interpretive panels and kiosks and such so, but that turned into, you know, knowing and getting to meet a lot of the people that eventually ended up doing the hiring in the Fish and Wildlife Service. So I that's how I sort of cut my path, and this is how I get into the organization.

[wildlife sound]

Alaska is one of those, I think areas that anybody who gets into the field of conservation or wildlife biology or, or work just has this this mysterious sort of place where it must just be unbelievable, you know, up in Alaska, so I worked in North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming a little bit, you know, for actually several years, probably the first 10 years of my career. And then I noticed there was an opportunity up here in Alaska at a place called Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. I actually had a very good friend who had also worked out at Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, and the stories that he had told about not just there, but across Alaska, were always I found very intriguing. And so I sat down with my wife, we had a couple of children at the time, and we talked about why was this an interest where we really want to

pursue, and we arrived at the absolutely, and we put our name in the hat for that position as the refuge manager out at Izembek refuge, and I was fortunate enough to get the job offer and we had an unbelievably excited family, you know, on our way up with the opportunity to come up and live and work in Alaska for a while.

We went to Bellingham Washington and put our vehicle on a ferry as well as all four of us and, rode the ferry up through the Inside Passage, and it didn't take you very long to start realizing that oh my gosh, the scale of Alaska is just so different than you know what you experienced in the lower 48. You know, Orca whales and sea lions and things that you were starting to experience along the way was so very different than working in the Midwest and west part of the United States. And we got to Haines, Alaska and drove up around and through the Toke area and down into Anchorage, and again, you know, That takes two days just to make that drive. You start again to realize the scale up here. It's just so remarkable. And it was springtime. So by the time we hit Anchorage, you know, all the leaves were on the trees and it was beautiful and, you know, warm, it was really probably temperatures running in the 60s and 70s. So everything about it was just a real welcoming sort of feel, and then a flight from Anchorage to Izembek 640 miles by air. And again, that just starts to give you that sense of the scale of the place that you're now headed to or you're going to get an opportunity to live in. It's just so remarkable. We landed and Izembek was one of those. It was one of those rare days and Izembek claims or Cold Bay, Alaska claims to have, you know, a dozen to 15 you know sunny days a year. And we landed on one of those remarkable days it was calm, there was very little wind. I was we were picked up at the airport by the refuge staff that was there. Spent a little bit of time just dropping off incidentals, but went for a quick ride out and around to see Izembek lagoon travel up the frosty road to see I'll just see some of the landscape which we're living saw a brown bear with cubs, the cubs were maybe knee high to the to the sow and they all stood up and looked at us and you just kind of like wow, we've moved to an amazingly different place. I think one of the most interesting aspects of Izembek refuge was learning the history behind the establishment of it. The area was established based on conserving the entire watershed of the lagoon itself. There was a refuge manager there that was named nicknamed Sea Otter Jones, Bob Jones was his name. And then when I read through the files of what he went through to establish the area, he had a very forward-looking approach. This was in 1995, when we in the Fish and Wildlife Service were coming to the realization that ecosystem management or large landscape management was an extremely important perspective that we should be applying. He had worked to establish Izembek on conserving the entire watershed of Izembek Lagoon. That meant he was drawing boundary lines around the Continental Divide, it is where the mountains switched and went from north to south on watersheds. And he kept sending in these reports that would recommend that we establish this refuge around this this watershed conservation effort. And he would get it back very engineering oriented about well, you need to draw it on section lines and on township lines, and you'd never be able to put a fence around it if you went on the Continental Divide. The next letter he would send back would be Wait, you don't do that here. We don't need signs, we need the conservation of the entire watershed. And with his I don't know it was a long effort for him was probably 10 or 15 years, he prevailed, finally, and all of the components of your ecological system are still in play, you know, large, brown bear associated with the area and you learn that there's wolves around and the caribou herd is still there. And there's both sea otters and land otters or river otters. And there's every Migratory Bird that's supposed to be in the system that we know of are still utilizing the area in the fall it fills up with, you know, pacific black brant and emperor geese and Taverners Canada

geese and all kinds of waterfowl from ducks, pin tails, and mallards, and Harlequins and sea ducks. I think that was one of the most remarkable realizations that everything that supposed to be here is still here.

I've always sort of had a real interest or passion for swans. And lo and behold, that Izembek graph into the lower Alaska peninsula area had a very resident species of tundra swans that we actually got to work with, and we would do an annual banding voyage and go out and herd the young birds together and put bands on them. But it was a, you know, again, a tremendous experience, but always been one of my sort of favorite critters and to be able to live and work and to actually get hands on again, you know, some of that true biology sort of stuff that makes you feel like you're really a part of the whole system was is pretty remarkable.

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Well all told was, you know, we spent three and a half, almost four years of the most amazing time out in Izembek with our kids being the right age, and we went there when they were six and eight. And, you know, they sort of grew up in that and they come to really love these sorts of wild places as well. We left for a couple of years, went back to Washington DC but then came back out and went to what's called the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. That was the refuge, the Aleutian Islands. It's kind of what they describe it as the rocks, the islands, the spires of coastal Alaska. And if you were to follow the sort of distance again, I get back to this scale issue, we'd say you could travel 2500 miles within just Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge from the southeast all the way up to the Arctic coastal plain, with some of the islands and associated habitats. So we live and work out of Homer, Alaska for the Alaska maritime for about eight or nine years. And I left again, went back to DC, and headquarters office, and then went up to Canada for four years and worked as the Chief Executive Officer for ducks, unlimited Canada, and then had the opportunity to come back to the Fish and Wildlife Service as the regional director here in Anchorage. So all told, you've probably got eight and 12 and 15, 8 to 17 years or so, you know, associated with working in Alaska.

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I think that, you know, the real, the real basics of it is I have a passion for wild places, and with wild places, all of the things that go with it, you know, the wildlife, and I would wish for everyone that they have an opportunity to experience, you know, Alaska at its finest. And for some that would be in in the dead of winter, when you experienced, you know, minus 50 and 60 degree temperatures, and you know, the Fairbanks area, the hot springs, the northern lights, the, you know, it's all connected to that incredibly wild landscape, I think what I've come to realize is I have a passion for the conservation of those types of places, but more so now even in the relationship with people that depend and utilize and also love these wild places. You know, we've believed in, wilderness areas for the sake of a person doesn't necessarily have to even ever experience it by stepping foot in there. But there's some solace in knowing that it's actually there for future generations, that others will have that opportunity. And I very much believe in that, that, you know, a lot of our work is oriented towards future generations. And I'm hoping that my kids that have come to love these incredibly wild Alaskan landscapes that their children and their children's children will have that same opportunity. And I think that's what we have here in

Alaska that we can continue to stay focused on ensuring that actually is represented for future future generations.

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This has been my life wildlife, the production of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Region, Office of External Affairs, producers, Lisa hub, and Kris Pacheco produced in story edited by David Hoffman for citizen racecar audio editing, sound design, and original music by Garrett Tiedemann artwork by Michelle Lawson. In Alaska, the employees of the US Fish and Wildlife Service are shared stewards of world renowned natural resources, and our nation's last true wild places. The lands and waters of this place we call home, nourish a vast and unique array of fish, wildlife and people. Our hope is that each generation has the opportunity to live with live from discover, and enjoy the wildness of this awe inspiring land and the people who love and depend on it.